

CENTERVIEW

Insight and analysis on
California education policy

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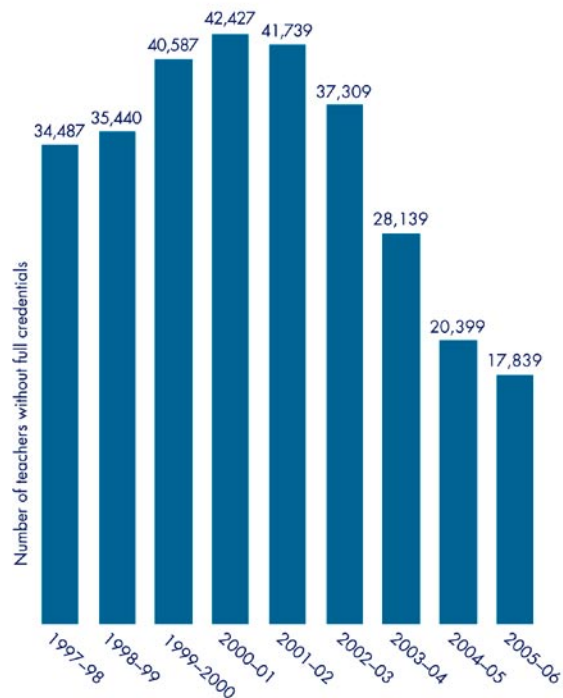
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"OUT-OF-FIELD" TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS ARE CALIFORNIA'S STUDENTS GETTING THE EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THEY NEED?

If all students are going to meet or exceed the rigorous academic standards that the state has set, California must ensure that there is a fully prepared and effective teacher in every classroom. Both state and federal policy-makers have risen to the challenge and made efforts over the past decade to boost the capacity of the teacher workforce in order to address the demands of today's schools. For example, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act and to meet the state's licensure requirements, all teachers are required to demonstrate subject matter competency in all core areas in which they teach. Since 2003, the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning has reported that the number of fully prepared teachers assigned to California's classrooms has increased significantly due in part to the efforts of federal, state and local education policy-makers.

Chart I

California's Underprepared Teachers, 1997-2006

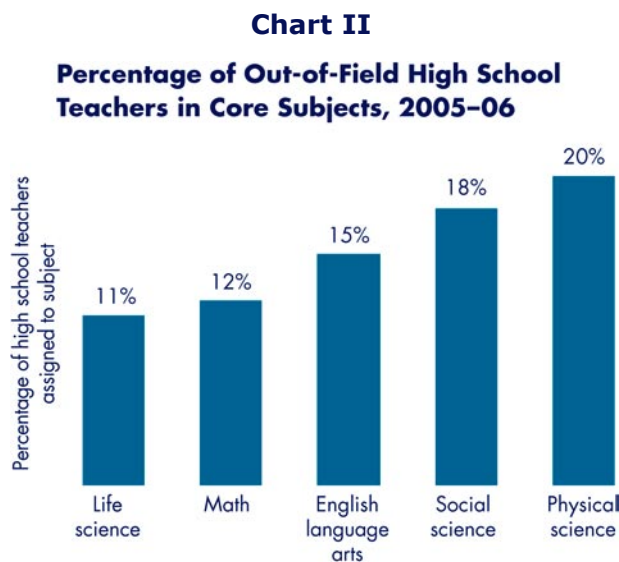


Source: California Department of Education.

As Chart I demonstrates, the overall number of underprepared teachers – those who have not yet met the state’s licensing requirement for a preliminary credential, including individuals working on emergency, preintern, and intern permits – has dropped 58 percent, from a high of 42,427 in 2000-01 to a low of 17,839 in 2005-06. Yet despite the many promising efforts to build and maintain the capacity of the current teacher workforce, too many students are being assigned to classrooms where teachers may lack an adequate knowledge of the subjects they teach such as mathematics, science and English. When an individual teacher holds a teaching credential in one subject area, but is assigned to one or more classes outside of that area by the local district, those teachers are referred to as having an “out-of-field” assignment. This edition of *CenterView* provides information and policy recommendations on the unique aspects of out-of-field teaching assignments.

What is Out-of-Field Teaching?

Out-of-field teaching assignments occur most often in high schools where classes focus on a single subject such as English, science, or mathematics and specialized expertise in subjects is critical.¹ Despite the federal No Child Left Behind requirement, from time to time in high schools the shortage of a fully prepared teacher in one subject can result in the assignment of a faculty member who is fully credentialed in one subject being assigned to another, even if he or she has limited knowledge or training in that subject. For example, a credentialed mathematics teacher might be called upon to teach a biology class that requires professional preparation and expertise in the area of life science. As Chart II demonstrates, out-of-field assignments are quite prevalent and most often found in mathematics, science, English and social science classes. These assignments represent a significant percentage of the teachers assigned to these core classes. Unlike the positive changes in the number of underprepared teachers discussed above, there appears to be little variation in the percentage of out-of-field teaching assignments from year to year.



Source: California Department of Education.

1. Middle school teachers are allowed to hold either a multiple subjects credential (primarily designed for elementary teachers) or a single subject credential. Thus, an eighth-grade Algebra I teacher may not be considered out-of-field if he or she holds a multiple subjects credential. Therefore, this *CenterView* only discusses out-of-field assignments at the high school level.

How Does it Happen?

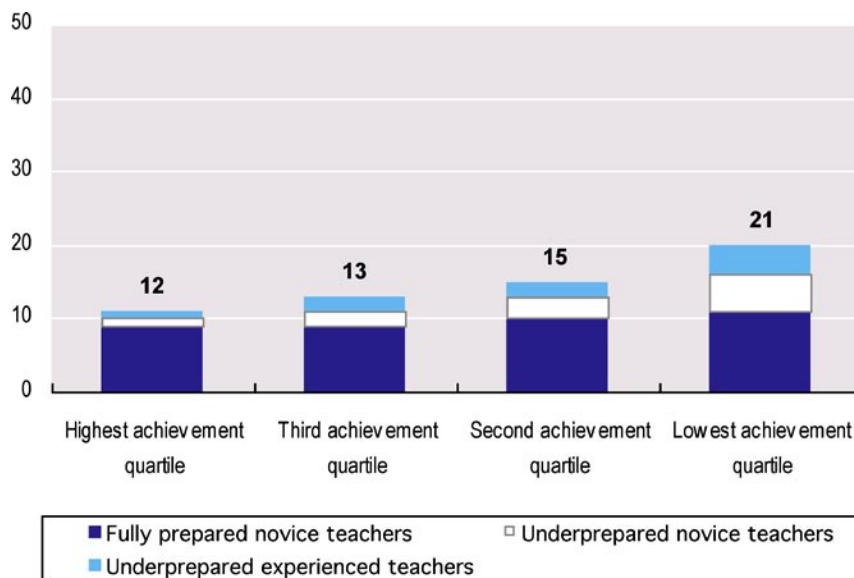
One often cited reason for the use of out-of-field teachers in any given year is the fluctuation in student enrollment and teacher availability. Such fluctuations can create a mismatch between the number of classes needed and the qualifications of the teachers on staff. Even in situations where new staff can be hired, these mismatches between the need for specific classes and the preparation of the staff can and do occur. When creating a school master schedule, principals are often constrained by the availability of teachers with the appropriate credentials and, at times, feel they have no option but to make out-of-field assignments. The state's education code outlines the conditions under which local districts may make out-of-field assignments. Generally, these assignments require the agreement of the school site administrator, the affected teacher and the district governing board. In addition, some expectations are set for subject matter knowledge either through higher education coursework or local verification. Unfortunately, there appears to be little assistance provided to teachers accepting out-of-field assignments. Neither specialized professional development nor other kinds of support and mentoring are provided on a timely basis.

What Impact Does it Have?

Out-of-field teaching assignments aggravate already existing staffing problems in a number of ways. As recently as 2005-06, in 5% of the schools in the state—or about 430 schools serving 280,000 students—more than 20% of the faculty was underprepared. In that same year, 21% of the schools in the state had 20% or more novice (first and second year) teachers. As you can see in Chart III, low-performing schools have a disproportionate number of underprepared and novice teachers. In addition, the subject areas with the most out-of-field teaching assignments are frequently core subject areas, such as mathematics and science, which already have large percentages of underprepared teachers. The extent to which classrooms in these schools are staffed by out-of-field, underprepared *and* novice teachers creates a combination of staffing problems that may undermine a school's instructional programs. For example, as the number of teachers needing additional support from experienced veteran teachers increases, the number of veteran teachers available to help them—already a limited commodity—decreases.

Chart III

Percent of Underprepared and Novice Teachers by API Achievement Quartile, 2005-06



Recent research has documented the fact that students who fall behind their peers as a result of poor instruction frequently need several years to recover. For high school students, who are now required to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of math and English on the California High School Exit Exam in order to graduate, this can be a major concern. It can also be a problem for students who must succeed in college preparatory classes, which include English, mathematics, social studies, art, foreign language and science. For these students there may not be adequate time to make up for the impact of underprepared and out-of-field teachers and inadequate instruction.

The Center View

It is clearly in the best interest of students to ensure they are taught by those who know their subject matter and have the instructional skills to deliver that content powerfully and well. Research, as well as common sense, suggests that it is important for teachers to be trained in the subject matter they are teaching. Not surprisingly, recent polling data indicate that the public agrees: 69% of Californians strongly favor measures to ensure teachers are experts in the subjects they teach. While flux in student enrollment and the need for cost-efficiency may drive schools to use out-of-field assignments for a limited number of teachers, the state and districts should take steps to decrease the incidence of such assignments and lessen their impact on students. We believe that there are a variety of approaches that warrant consideration:

- A good first step would be to provide state and local policy-makers with a more complete picture of the use of out-of-field teachers throughout California. To complement the new statewide CalTIDES teacher data system, local data efforts, modeled after those the Center has supported in Kern, Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties, should be encouraged throughout the state. Such local systems would allow principals and district administrators to easily identify which classes in which schools are taught consistently by out-of-field teachers, and track this over time so that better preparation, recruitment and hiring decisions can be made.
- To help offset the need for out-of-field assignments, the state should commission and fund a series of local agency, multi-year pilot programs that recruit, train and support regional pools of qualified retired teachers to fill shortages in core subject areas. Any applicable earnings caps on retirement pay should be waived for teachers who participate in these programs. The programs should be independently evaluated and the findings and recommendations reported to the Governor and Legislature.
- Encouragement and guidelines for the use of local professional development funds for “just in time” professional development (training especially designed to provide content and instructional strategies that boost teachers’ understanding of the subject) and other supports for out-of-field teachers should be developed by the California Department of Education with the advice and assistance of teachers and administrators from throughout the state.
- Statewide measures should be adopted to ensure that high school students do not have more than one out-of-field, novice or underprepared teacher per school year.